

Virginia Reentry Pilot Programs

Background

In July of 2003 the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices announced that Virginia was one of seven states selected to participate in its Prisoner Reentry Policy Academy. Through the academy, NGA assisted state teams in developing effective prisoner reentry strategies designed to reduce costly recidivism rates by improving pre-and post-release services. Other participating states included Georgia, Idaho, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey and Rhode Island. This intensive 18-month program included an in-state policy workshop, policy academy meetings, and customized technical assistance.

In Virginia, beyond the general need to improve inmate skills and abilities to become productive citizens after release from prison, a more immediate and tangible issue is the number returning to prison. Recidivism rates have remained relatively constant over the past few years. However, although crime and arrest rates have been declining in Virginia during that same time, the state prison population continues to grow. There are two reasons for this: longer time served by offenders under truth-in-sentencing legislation adopted in 1994 and a measurable increase in the number of offenders returned to prison for technical violations of their probation and parole.

An initial step in Virginia's participation in the academy was to bring together representatives of the agencies and organizations that deliver services to ex-offenders and their families. This included: Office of the Secretary of Public Safety, Virginia Departments of Corrections, Correctional Education, Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, Health, Social Services, Housing and Community Development, Criminal Justice Services, Juvenile Justice, the Parole Board, and the Virginia Employment Commission. Additional participants included staff from the General Assembly, the Virginia Sentencing Commission, the state's non-profit Pre and Post Incarceration Services providers, and representatives of inmate and family support groups, as well as other departments and organizations that provide services at the state and local levels.

Over 20 months, the Virginia Reentry group has met together and as sub-committees to identify the specific causes for reentry failure in the state and develop strategies to address these. The overall reentry group identified and prioritized reentry barriers and needs. Subcommittees were then established, based on broad categorizations of need or barriers to successful reentry. These included:

- Financial Obligations, Housing, and Financial and Community Resources
- Employment and Education
- Family & Community Reintegration
- Health, Mental Health, and Substance Abuse

Each subcommittee developed a list of roadblocks to successful reintegration, and proposed actions to address those. The sub-committees continue to meet to adjust strategies as new data becomes available. However, in order to test the impact of the strategies that have been developed, five pilot programs will be conducted.

Reentry Pilot Programs

Virginia Reentry Pilot Programs will be established in five localities of the state. These pilot programs will allow for testing and evaluating the implementation of the recommendations and strategies developed from Virginia's participation in the NGA Policy Academy on Prisoner Reentry. Pilot program results will assist in decision making on the most cost effective methods to approach delivery of reentry pre- and post- release services that support decreased recidivism and quality of life improvements for released offenders, their families and communities.

Pilot programs will be developed around two primary principles, integrated service delivery and interagency collaboration. Pilot localities will be selected on a volunteer basis. This will not be a new program nor will it impose any requirements on institutions or local government agencies and their community partners. On a strictly voluntary basis, directors of local departments of social services will serve as the convening agency in the pilot localities and will bring together representatives of public and private agencies, businesses, community-based service providers and faith-based organizations to form a local reentry council. These local councils will develop a reentry plan for their locality that identifies resources available, methods for interagency coordination and implementation of policy academy recommendations. Each locality will have an assigned state correctional facility from which a minimum of 25 and a maximum of 50 offenders will be referred for participation in the pilot program.

The reentry pilots will be for 18-24 months and have three key phases. Phase I will focus on providing on a scheduled basis to inmates of the participating correctional facility information about services and obligations that effect them and their families during their time of incarceration.

Phase II of the pilots will begin three to six months before the release of participating inmates. Representatives of the correctional facility and the local reentry council will meet with the offender and develop plans for their return to the community. This planning will address financial obligations, housing, and financial and community resources, education and training, employment, health, mental health, and family and community reintegration and will include measurable outcomes.

Phase III of the reentry pilots will cover the 12 months following the ex-offender's return to the community. During this phase there will be contact with a team representing the reentry council. Councils will develop methods for on-going communication and support for the returning ex-offender and established outcomes will be measured at one month, three months, six months and 12 months following release. Phase III will also include a fatherhood/motherhood and family to family mentoring component in which trained mentors will walk with the ex-offenders and his or her family during the re-entry process. Mentors will serve as concerned adults who provide support and help bridge positive connections with the community.

Proposed Pilot Facilities

Greensville Correctional Center
Coffeewood Correctional Center
Haynesville Correctional Center
Powhatan Correctional Center
Fluvanna Correctional Center

Community Integration

Norfolk/Greensville-Emporia
Culpeper
King G.& Planning District Counties*
Richmond
Culpeper/Richmond/Norfolk

*Spotsylvania, Stafford, Fredericksburg, Caroline